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CAR WARS Heating Up

U.S. buyers less satisfied with domestic automakers, survey finds

By Dan Strumpf The Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. car buyers are growing less satisfied with their purchases from domestic automakers while their Asian and European competitors continue to improve, according to a recent survey.

Consumer satisfaction with U.S. auto brands slipped as Lexus and BMW tied for first place, followed by Toyota and Honda, according to the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index released Tuesday.

General Motors Corp.'s Buick and Cadillac brands, and Ford Motor Co.'s Lincoln and Mercury lines, fell from their No. 2 perch at a time when U.S. companies are struggling to outshine their competitors and reverse their shrinking sales and market share.

That's an unsettling sign for domestic automakers, said Claes Fornell, the University of Michigan business professor who heads the annual survey. Traditionally, U.S. brands improve their customer satisfaction scores each year, just not as much as their overseas counterparts. Now, the domestic companies' ratings are declining while their competitors' scores continue to climb.

The auto industry's customer satisfaction has increased steadily over time and its overall score of 82 — unchanged from the high set a year ago — is higher than many other industries the index tracks.

In addition, just 11 points separate the best-scoring brand from the worst, but domestic automakers are having the hardest time adapting to high gasoline prices and a shift in demand toward more fuel efficient vehicles, and that is manifesting itself in weaker customer satisfaction, Fornell said.

Asian and European automakers crowded the upper end of the rankings. BMW gained one point to score 87, tying Toyota Motor Corp.'s Lexus luxury brand, which held the top spot alone last year. Toyota's namesake brand and fellow Japanese automaker Honda Motor Co. both rose two points to 86.

Several U.S. brands, by contrast, saw their ratings slump. Buick and Cadillac fell a point to a score of 85, while Chevrolet slipped three points to 79. GM's Saturn brand, however, jumped four points to 85, which Fornell said was largely due to the brand's better fuel economy.

Lincoln and Mercury lost three points to 83, while the score for Ford's namesake brand was unchanged at 80.

Chrysler LLC's brands fared the worst among the domestic automakers. Its Dodge and Jeep lines sat at the bottom of the 22-brand ranking, while its namesake brand shared the fifth-to-last spot with Ford.





THE ASSOCIATED PRESS In this photo from earlier this year, visitors look at a BMW X6 at the Auto China 2008 auto show in Beijing. BMW and Lexus tied for first in consumer satisfaction in a news survey.